

FIGHTING SLAVERY

ASA TURNER'S IOWA BAND

by Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernek

While in their final year of seminary in the East, a handful of determined young men decided that upon graduation in 1829, they would travel to what was then the far reaches of the frontier—Jacksonville, Illinois.

These idealistic graduates of mostly eastern seminaries such as Yale recognized that they were in a position to influence the moral and intellectual character of fledgling communities in the West. Known as the Yale Band, they began to organize churches and Sabbath schools and to found colleges and seminaries. In this way they sought to transplant the values of eastern Congregationalism. These values, including an ardent opposition to slavery, were grounded in religious conviction and communicated with missionary zeal.

The American Home Missionary Society played a primary role in this movement. Many of its missionaries belonged to a religious and intellectual tradition—eastern Presbyterianism and Congregationalism—that was inextricably tied to abolitionism. Although individual missionaries varied in their degree of militancy, abolitionists saw them as instruments of their cause and financially backed the Home Missionary Society.

Upon arrival in Jacksonville, the missionaries helped found Illinois College. It became known for

the abolitionist views espoused there. Indeed, “so pronounced were [its] antislavery sentiments that a proslavery man like the father of William H. Herndon, Abraham Lincoln’s law partner, took his son out of the college before his course was completed, but not soon enough to prevent him from becoming an outspoken abolitionist.”

The Yale Band was part of a network of abolitionist activities that allowed swift political organization. Churches, schools, and associations provided platforms from which to condemn slavery and provide protection for proselytizing on such a volatile issue.

The missionaries as a whole were outspoken in their denunciation of slavery, even when their lives were in danger. During the 1830s, Illinois was the setting of frequent, dramatic, and sometimes violent clashes between Congregationalist clergy and proslavery forces, especially near the Illinois-Missouri border.

In 1837, when antislavery editor Rev. Elijah Lovejoy was attacked by proslavery mobs and his press dumped in the Mississippi, Congregationalist minister Edward Beecher defended Lovejoy. (Edward was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher, and the first president of Illinois College.) In the dark of a November night, he helped Lovejoy store a new press in a warehouse at Alton. The next night Lovejoy was shot dead. It was noted that Lovejoy “accomplished more by his death than he could have done by years of labor. The Congregationalists of Illinois were Abolitionists from that hour and so were the mass of intelligent and moral men.”

Upriver, Rev. David Nelson also was threatened by a mob. He “hid in the Mississippi Bottom, watching for an opportunity to cross a ford which his enemies were also watching, armed with rifles and whiskey

Opposite: In 1843, Asa Turner (bottom) called for Congregationalist missionaries to start colleges and churches in Iowa that denounced slavery.

Center: Mary Ann and William Salter were among those who answered the call; one of William’s most powerful sermons, “Slavery and Recent Events” in December 1859, was reprinted in a Burlington newspaper.

Top: Abolitionist letterhead bears a popular symbol of the antislavery movement.

IMAGE OF ASA TURNER: SHSI (DES MOINES). REMAINING THREE: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

canteens." Nelson was rescued by two members of the Quincy church. The escape averted a potentially violent mob situation.

Not long after, proslavery forces in Quincy attempted to drive out another member of the Yale Band, Asa Turner. Even so, he organized 13 churches in the years 1830–1837.

Across the Mississippi in Iowa, Asa Turner and Julius Reed set out to continue the work of planting religious and educational institutions. Turner soon became the pastor of the first permanent Congregationalist church in Iowa, in Denmark.

The village had been founded in 1835 by a band of pioneers of apparently strong antislavery belief. Shortly after their arrival, they began working with the nearby Salem settlement of Quakers. Denmark functioned as the next stop on the underground railroad after Salem.

According to historian Scott Grau, in 1840, "Turner and two-thirds of his congregation in Denmark launched the Iowa Territory's first abolitionist organization, the Denmark Anti-Slavery Society." Turner, along with many in his denomination, "urged Congregationalists to withhold fellowship from professing Christians who held slaves. He endorsed the doctrine of immediate emancipation of slaves with no compensation for slaveholders."

By 1843, Turner had persuaded 11 young missionaries to join him in Iowa. They became known as the Iowa Band. Of the many institutions that the Iowa Band helped found, the most well known is Iowa College. Founded in Davenport in 1847, Iowa College was moved to Grinnell in 1859, a hotbed of abolitionism. (It was renamed Grinnell College in 1909.)

Organizing colleges and churches was one of the attractions of the frontier because of the opportunity to shape the character of a newly settled region. It is interesting to note that several of these missionaries' posts would subsequently become stations on the underground railroad.

According to Julius Reed, all of the Congregationalist ministers in Iowa at that time were "a unit politically from the first. Two subjects dominated and threw all others into the shade; they were the overthrow of the saloon and of slavery." He continued, "Frequently temperance and slavery were the subjects of sermons, and a religious service was rarely held in which one or both of these subjects were not mentioned."

Another in the Iowa Band was Ephraim Adams, born in New Hampshire. According to biographer Scott Grau, "Adams attended Phillips Andover Academy to prepare for college, but was one of 50 students who walked out of Phillips because the school's principal forbade them to join an antislavery society." In Iowa, Grau continues, Adams "preached at Mount Pleasant for a year, then settled in Davenport, where he would remain until 1855. His sermons frequently targeted the evils of slavery and alcohol, sometimes alienating the German immigrants and Southern-born settlers moving into the rapidly growing Mississippi River town, but he continued to push these themes despite some opposition."

Those in the Iowa Band were among the Iowans who protested laws that had been pushed through the territorial legislature by proslavery forces in 1839. Known as Black Laws, they restricted the freedom of movement of blacks and mulattoes.

Asa Turner saw political action as an effective means of furthering his deeply held moral and religious principles. Believing that "questions of political reform properly fell within the sphere of activity of the Christian minister," he became directly involved in the 1854 gubernatorial election on behalf of James W. Grimes, an outspoken opponent of slavery and its extension into new territories.

Grau notes that "in 1854 Turner, along with two other Congregational clergy, worked to bring about a fusion of free-soil Democrats, Liberty Party abolitionists, and Conscience Whigs by supporting the Whig nomination of James W. Grimes for governor of Iowa. After an assembly of free-soil and antislavery forces at Crawfordsville, in March 1854, the fusion forces endorsed Grimes, and in August he was elected governor on an antislavery and prohibitionist platform, signaling the end of nearly a decade of Democratic rule in the state."

In Iowa, perhaps more than anywhere, Congregationalism and abolitionism went hand in hand. ♦

This article is a portion of the National Historic Landmark Nomination for the Reverend George B. Hitchcock House, which was written by Leah D. Rogers and Clare L. Kernec of Tallgrass Historians, L.C.